

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 245

CS 003 305

AUTHOR Berger, Allen; Andolina, Charlene
TITLE How Administrators Make Decisions About Reading and Other Language Arts in Schools Throughout the United States.
INSTITUTION Pittsburgh Univ., Pa. School of Education.
PUB DATE [76]
GRANT RG-01031272
NOTE 13p.; Unpublished report prepared at the University of Pittsburgh

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; *Decision Making; *Educational Practice; *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Sources; *Information Utilization; Instructional Innovation; *Language Arts

ABSTRACT

In order to assess the role that research plays in educational decision making and to evaluate the ways in which administrators learn about the educational practices which find their way into schools, a four-page questionnaire was sent to the superintendents of 1000 school districts throughout the United States. Superintendents were asked to enhance the researchers' understanding of instructional changes in reading and the other language arts by detailing sources of information about educational practices and by explaining the degree of their familiarity with and implementation of educational practices. Data indicated that the information sources used by educational decision makers were, in order of their importance: journals, periodicals, and bulletins; school or district inservice education; course work and textbooks; informal meetings; conference proceedings; and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Findings indicate that many schools in remote parts of the nation are engaged in educational innovation. Location, therefore, does not play a large part in the research/practice relationship. What does seem to make a difference in decision making is the presence and concern of one or two key people--teachers or administrators. (KS)

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How Administrators Make Decisions
About Reading and Other Language Arts
in Schools Throughout the United States

Allen Berger and Charlene Andolina
University of Pittsburgh

Have you ever wondered how administrators make decisions? What do they base them on? What role does research play in these decisions? How do administrators learn about educational practices which may find their way into your school?

Questionnaires Survey (1976)

To find answers to these and other questions, we sent a four-page questionnaire to the superintendents of one thousand school districts throughout the United States. (We selected every seventeenth school district in Patterson's American Education.) We asked the school superintendents to cooperate in enhancing our understanding as to how instructional changes are put into practice. We expressed interest in learning through the questionnaire about (1) sources of information about educational practices and (2) degree of familiarity and implementation of educational practices in the schools.

This study was supported in part by Research Grant No. 01031272 from the School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The authors acknowledge with pleasure the valuable suggestions made by Stephen M. Koziol, Jr., School of Education, University of Pittsburgh.

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The questionnaire had been designed so that the respondents had the opportunity to indicate their degree of familiarity with the practices, and whether or not they had implemented them in the last 3, 5, or 10 years. By marking one of the five columns on the left side of the questionnaire, the respondent indicated, for instance, familiarity with and/or implementation of flexible grouping, cloze procedure, programmed learning, miscue analysis, programs for learning disabled and for the gifted. They had the opportunity to respond to 40 items.

The questionnaire included a lie factor which was composed of ten items such as ontogeneous reading instruction, burst-on-target reading, and BRA Study Skills. We were pleased to note that, while some respondents indicated a familiarity with these non-existent items, few indicated they had been implemented in their schools.

To each of the 40 items the 454 respondents indicated their sources of information. That is, how did they know about rebus readers, or mapping, or the maze technique? Through courses? periodicals? inservice? informal meetings? conference proceedings? ERIC? other sources?

Of the 454 respondents, 176 or 38.8% were superintendents of schools. The other positions held were identified and ordered as follows: principal (13.4%), reading personnel (11.7%), curriculum coordinator (9.9%), assistant superintendent (8.8%), director of instruction (7.5%), classroom teacher (3.3%), director of special services (1.8%), and director of research and evaluation (0.9%). A small percentage (4%) of the respondents did not indicate their position within the schools.

Questionnaires were returned from school districts in every state, with the largest number of responses coming from Arkansas (36), Nebraska (35), Idaho (28), Texas (26), and Pennsylvania (19). The largest school district represented was Los Angeles, with 670,000 students, others included Baltimore, 160,000; Denver, 85,000; Boston, 75,000; Fort Worth and Newark, both approximately 72,000. Examples of small school districts returning questionnaires were Angwin, California; Mill Shoals, Illinois; Dixon, Montana; Boynton, Oklahoma; and Old Glory, Texas.

Respondents identified sources of information that were most useful to them and, from their responses, it is clear that most of their information about educational practices comes from journals, periodicals, and bulletins (92.5%) followed by school or district inservice education (90.1%), course work and textbooks (89.9%), informal meetings with colleagues (82.4%), conference proceedings (70.5%), and ERIC (24.0%). Approximately five percent of respondents made a notation (in the space for other) that publishers' representatives and teachers' manuals are an important source of information for them.

Even with this variety of sources, there is a time lag between information about educational practices and their implementation as reflected in the following table.

--- Insert Table here ---

From the table one can observe that the cloze procedure, devised in the fifties, appears to be familiar to less than half (44.5%) of respondents with about one-fifth (20.1%) indicating use of it in their schools. Miscue analysis, devised in the sixties, is familiar to about one-fourth (26.1%) of respondents with one-eighth (12.5%) using it in their schools.

Of special interest is the information about programs for the gifted and language arts for the bilingual students. Instruction is provided to meet the individual needs of the gifted in about half (47.8%) of the schools. Programs for the bilingual students are operating in approximately one-third (31.5%) of the responding districts.

It is of interest to observe that every school district that responded to the questionnaire employs either a reading consultant (60.8%), reading coordinator (49.6%), reading specialist (69.6%), reading supervisor (37.5%), or some combination of these reading personnel. Salaried and volunteer reading aides appear to be an integral part of the language arts program in over one-half of the school districts.

Telephone Interviews (1977)

The last item on the questionnaire was an invitation to participate in a ten-minute telephone interview to pursue in more depth the information obtained through the questionnaires. We were interested in learning more about the role research plays in decisions relating to classroom practices and about the role of ERIC. We also were interested in ways in which research comes into schools, how research findings are shared, and changes made and not made on the basis of research.

To obtain this further information we engaged in cross-sectional telephone interviews, picking at random fifteen small and large school districts in areas from which came the largest number of questionnaire returns: the South, Midwest, Mountain, Southwest, and Northeastern parts of the United States.

From the telephone conversations (which took longer than the ten-minutes expected), we learned:

- (1) Smaller school districts tend to be at a disadvantage in having access to information about educational practices and research.
- (2) This disadvantage for smaller school districts is at times overcome by key personnel who keep abreast of educational developments in research and practice.
- (3) Larger school districts tend to have greater access to educational research, tend to invite more speakers who are authors of educational publications, and tend to do more of their own research.
- (4) State departments of education play a useful role for small and large school districts in regard to information about research and practice.
- (5) School districts of all sizes indicating no familiarity with ERIC were in fact receiving ERIC information in various forms from their state departments of education according to the cross-sectional telephone interview survey.

Conclusions and Implications

From the questionnaire survey and the telephone interviews it seems clear that schools of all sizes are in touch with educational practices in other states. The major source of information about what goes on elsewhere is the written word which comes periodically. This is not too surprising since we all have our favorite periodicals which we read regularly. School and district-wide inservice programs are also high on the list as a source of information about educational practices followed (by less than half a percentage point) by college textbooks and courses. Since a great deal of what we have learned as children and adults has taken place in classrooms, it is not surprising that we should continue to learn in this

setting as professionals. Conversations with colleagues appear to be the next most important source of information about educational practices.

The respondents indicated less use of conference proceedings than any of the other sources of information mentioned thus far. This is understandable, for conference proceedings tend to focus more on theory; and many proceedings, theoretical or practical, are no longer being published. The last time that a complete proceedings of papers presented at an International Reading Association Convention appeared (in four volumes) was in 1969 from the convention held the previous year in Boston. The last complete proceedings of papers presented at a World Congress on Reading appeared (in one volume) in 1975 when the congress met the previous year in Vienna, Austria.

Last on the list as a source of information about educational practices is ERIC, although the telephone interviews lead us to believe that more use is made of ERIC materials than the finding suggests, for nearly all those interviewed indicated reading the ERIC section in educational journals as well as reports based on ERIC coming from State Departments of Education.

From the data it is clear that the gap between research and practice is a large one, but we should avoid leaping to the conclusion that this is a bad situation, for much reading research is one-shot, fragmentary, ill-conceived, and lacking in relevant replication. Compliments should be paid to teachers and administrators who do not allow such research to be placed into practice in their schools.

On the other hand, the gap may exist for reasons other than noteworthy. Not one person interviewed, for example, could give an example of research not put into practice as a result of a careful examination of the research. It seems that we tend not to be cautious consumers of educational research, a fact borne out even with the research that is put into practice. More often the decision is made on the basis of testimonials than on a careful consideration and examination of relevant research.

Similar situations, of course, exist in areas of endeavor outside the field of education. In social work, ideas that are put into practice come more from the needs of the people than from research.

The mayor makes a phone call because of phone calls he has received. Businessmen complain about teenagers lounging outside their stores and such complaints, appearing in newspaper stories, result in other projects. Staff observation of related concerns of clients is another source of new projects. ...practitioners see certain needs in the community, make plans to meet these needs, and then turn to research to enhance the value of their fledgling projects.

(Berger, 1974)

Physicians used to cure people by blood-sucking leeches; now blood is injected into people. It may be a comfort to know that we in education are not far behind other professions in using research judiciously (Berger, 1976).

In summary, there are many schools in remote parts of the nation, as well as in areas not so remote, engaging in brave new ventures. Location does not seem to play much of a role in the research-practice relationship. We were surprised, for instance, to find the limited connection between the location of schools and their use of ERIC. What seems to make the

crucial difference in decision-making relating to reading and other language arts is one or two key people--teachers or administrators--in the school district. As we have noted elsewhere (Berger and Andolina, 1976), and which is appropriate here, there is an adage in the field of real estate which conveys the wisdom that the three most important things to consider in buying a piece of real estate are location, location, and location. In considering how decisions are made affecting classroom practices, it seems clear that the three most important things to consider are people, people and people.

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Degree of Familiarity with and Implementation of Educational Practices

<u>Educational Practices</u>	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Unfamiliarity	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Familiarity Without Implementation	<u>Percentage of Respondents Indicating Implementation</u>			Total Percentage Indicating Implementation
			<u>Within 3 years</u>	<u>Within 5 years</u>	<u>Within 10 years</u>	
Flexible Grouping	3.1	26.9	20.5	21.1	27.8	69.4
Flexible Scheduling	2.2	46.0	14.5	17.2	19.6	51.3
Special Programs for the Gifted Child	3.7	47.4	20.9	10.6	16.3	47.8
Learning Disabled Classes	2.2	16.1	33.9	23.8	22.9	82.8
Non-graded Classes	3.7	47.6	12.6	13.7	22.0	48.3
Open Classroom	3.3	55.1	11.5	17.0	12.6	41.1
Vertical Grouping	26.7	36.8	12.8	10.1	11.2	34.1
Alpha-One Phonics	39.0	31.1	13.9	10.4	4.2	28.5
Maze Technique	70.7	20.7	1.8	1.8	.9	4.5
Cloze Procedure	52.9	24.4	8.6	6.4	5.1	20.1
Mapping	60.6	25.3	4.4	2.4	2.6	9.4
Learning Activity Packets	6.6	33.0	28.6	18.5	11.2	58.3
Learning Centers	1.5	20.9	32.6	26.0	17.4	76.0
Anecdotal Records	4.8	21.1	13.4	12.3	46.0	71.7
Diagnostic Observations and Conferences	4.4	16.3	23.3	17.8	36.1	84.4
Diagnostic Reading Skills Checklist	4.6	16.7	26.0	21.4	29.1	80.1
Teacher Designed Tests	4.2	20.7	15.4	13.7	48.2	77.3
Open-Ended Questions	8.6	24.9	13.4	12.6	38.3	64.3
Reality Index to Determine Capacity Levels	66.3	17.4	5.5	2.6	4.0	12.1

(table concluded)

<u>Educational Practices</u>	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Unfamiliarity	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Familiarity Without Implementation	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Implementation			Total Percentage Indicating Implementation
			Within 3 years	Within 5 years	Within 10 years	
Miscue Analysis	63.9	20.0	6.8	3.3	2.4	12.5
Comic Books as Reading Material for Instruction	3.5	43.8	21.6	12.3	17.6	51.5
Book-Cassette Combination	.9	9.9	29.3	23.1	35.9	88.3
Paperback Books for Individualized Reading Instr.	4.4	22.2	28.6	26.4	17.2	72.2
Film Strip - Book Combinations	3.1	21.6	26.7	23.6	24.0	79.7
Programmed Learning Techniques	2.9	24.2	24.2	17.4	29.7	71.3
Rebus Readers	46.3	30.2	5.7	7.3	7.3	20.3
Use of Teacher-Made Materials	2.6	5.9	17.8	7.9	60.1	85.8
Auditory Perception Training	10.4	22.9	24.9	17.0	23.1	65.0
Language Arts for Bilingual Students	21.6	43.6	15.2	7.5	8.8	31.5
Language Arts Programs that Coordinate Various Disciplines	12.3	34.8	18.1	11.9	20.5	50.5
Language Experience Approach to Reading	15.2	28.4	15.9	12.6	25.1	53.6
Multi-Basal Reader Approach	11.0	23.3	15.2	11.7	35.9	62.8
Use of Semantic Instruction to Improve Comprehension	42.7	29.3	9.0	4.4	11.7	25.1
Visual Perception Training	14.5	24.9	20.9	15.0	22.2	58.1
Reading Consultant	3.5	37.3	18.5	10.6	31.7	60.8
Reading Coordinator	4.6	40.1	16.1	11.5	22.0	49.6
Reading Specialist	3.1	21.6	20.9	16.5	32.2	69.6
Reading Supervisors	5.5	46.9	12.1	7.1	18.3	37.5
Salaried Reading Aides	5.7	24.9	20.3	22.2	21.8	64.3
Volunteer Reading Aides	7.3	29.5	19.2	18.9	18.5	56.6